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O'Neill was in right place at right time

Unexpectedly, war shift primed O'Neill for power

By Paul Clancy
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The last edition of The Evening Star came off the presses at about 4:30 p.m. on Sept. 14, 1967. Within a few minutes, copies were delivered all over town. Half a dozen were dropped off at the White House; one was placed on a small cabinet just outside the Oval Office.

President Lyndon B. Johnson walked into the office at 5 p.m. He was just back from a fast trip to Kansas City where he had spoken to the International Association of Chiefs of Police and had visited briefly with former President Harry S. Truman in Independence.

Johnson glanced at the Star's front page and noted with satisfaction that the lead story was based on the speech he had delivered at noon: "Johnson Blasts Negro Militants." He had decided it was time to speak out against men like Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael who were urging blacks to rise up in violence to assert their rights. In his speech he had called them "poisonous propagandists."

Johnson skipped over the rest of the page. There didn't seem to be much good news. The Federal Reserve Board warned of inflation; B-52s bombed missile sites north of the demilitarized zone in Vietnam. He would get back to the paper and the stack of wire-service clips later. First he had to get a haircut. He was to meet the parents of daughter Lynda Bird's fiance, Charles S. Robb, for the first time this evening.

Back in his office before the 9 p.m. dinner, an aide called the president's attention to a four-paragraph story on Page 6 of the Star. It had been overlooked earlier. "O'Neill Splits With Johnson Over U.S. Vietnam Policy." Headlines are always noisier than the small type in news stories, and this one jumped out at the president. Sonofabitch! Not O'Neill, the good loyal Democrat, consistent supporter of the president? He picked up the phone: Get me Tip O'Neill.

The House had convened at noon that day. Two LBJ supporters took the floor to deliver short speeches in praise of the government's Vietnam War policy, all part of the Johnson administration's orchestrated response to critics. Tip O'Neill said nothing. Less than a month earlier, he had come to the decision that the Vietnam War was unwinnable, and that the U.S. should figure a way to get out. He had sent this word out to his constituents in a newsletter but had said nothing to reporters. Today he was unaware than someone had given the Star a copy of the newsletter and that the story would run in the afternoon editions of the paper.

Opposing the war had been a fateful decision for O'Neill and a profoundly difficult one for him to make. He thought it would ruin him among his hard-working blue-collar constituents who dutifully sent their boys to fight in Vietnam. Said O'Neill's oldest son, Thomas P. O'Neill III, "He felt he was absolutely gone politically. That was the worst time in his life." O'Neill's wife, Millie, agreed. "The reception he got at home was very rough . . . People were furious to think that he would do such a thing while their boys were still in the service. They thought it was very unpatriotic at the time."

As it turned out, his opposition to the war did not ruin him politically. Far from it. O'Neill began to try to turn his constituents around on the war, accelerating his already heavy schedule of speaking engagements around his district, cajoling hostile audiences with the same report on the progress of his thinking that he would later personally give the president of the United States. In the process, he became the most visible war opponent among the so-called Establishment politicians, the first to break with LBJ.

His actions also had an unexpected side effect: the younger congressional activists who had paid O'Neill scant attention in the past soon began to view him as a possible contender for House leadership. His new position showed them he could

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This is excerpted from the forthcoming book, Tip: A Biography of Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., *to be published next month by MacMillan.*

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blend loyalty to old politics with sensitivity to new ideas. But to Lyndon Johnson that day, he looked like a traitor.

The House session of September 14 dragged on until 8:45 p.m. Then O'Neill went off to join a late game of poker at the Metropolitan Club. As O'Neill tells it:

"At home that night, Eddie Boland (O'Neill's Washington roommate and fellow Massachusetts congressman) answers the phone. The president wants to talk to me. Christ, Eddie called the University Club. He called the Army and Navy Club. He called (ex-congressman) Fisher's office. He called the Democratic Club. We had never played before at the Metropolitan Club (they were ducking a pal who had been on a losing streak), so he never thought of calling me there.

"I came in at three o'clock in the morning and he said, Where'd you put the car? I says, it's in the garage. I had come straight up to the apartment from the garage. He says, the Secret Service is sitting downstairs in the lobby. They been waiting for you all night. I says, the what? He says, about the Star article. I says, what about the Star article? He says, Christ, Johnson's called 25 times. Call the White House regardless of what time you come in."

The president had gone to bed at 11:45 p.m., leaving a message for O'Neill with the White House switchboard: Come see me in the morning.

A Sorrowful LBJ

Johnson aides say it often was hard to tell whether the president was really angry when he started shouting or whether he was just being his rambunctious, generally profane, self. But for sure, he could not abide the thought of someone turning on him for political expediency and with no forewarning. To Johnson, it looked as though O'Neill had done just that. He had been angry; but the next morning he was sorrowful. "I can understand those ——— over on the floor opposing the war," he said to O'Neill, "but Jesus, you, my friend, to come out against me, I can't beieve it . . . are you going to tell me you know more about this war than I do?"

O'Neill slowly explained the making of his decision, a story to be told dozens of times over the next few years.

Early in 1967, O'Neill had been invited to address a meeting of the Boston College Chapter of the Young Democrats. A young man named Pat McCarthy was there too. McCarthy listened as O'Neill debated the Vietnam war with the students. O'Neill repeated, as he had many times in the past, that he had been briefed by everybody he could possibly be briefed by, from President Johnson on down. McCarthy stood up: "Have you ever been briefed by the other side?"

After the lecture that night, O'Neill said he got to thinking. No, he had not been briefed by the other side, not by anyone who would know anything about the situation. So he set out to learn all he could about the war.

The Other Side

A first stop was with Marine Corps Commandant David M. Shoup. To O'Neill's surprise, Shoup said he was opposed to continued U.S. participation in the war. He said the U.S. was fighting a war it couldn't win; what's more, it had no determination to win.

Next, O'Neill went to the Central Intelligence Agency. Actually, the CIA sought O'Neill out. Someone at the agency had heard the congressman was rethinking his position on Vietnam. So a high-ranking CIA officer (all involved contend they remember no names) contacted a man known as an O'Neill acquaintance, John D. Walker, and asked him to set up a meeting with the congressman. Walker was a senior U.S. intelligence officer for the Mideast, ostensibly assigned to the State Department.

The briefing for Tip was set up in Walter's home on P Street in Georgetown. O'Neill described the participants simply as "all the head CIA fellas." Whoever they were, they told O'Neill a surprising story. They said that despite public statements from U.S. government officials on the war in Vietnam, it was, indeed, going badly. The word "unwinnable" was used repeatedly. But they said the big problem was that their messages assessing the war were not reaching the president. They said reports sent to the White House were snatched off the president's desk by national security aides who disagreed with the gloomy warnings. Some others argued at the time that it was not the CIA's role to give advice; the agency was merely supposed to gather facts. Still, O'Neill was bothered by the talk that day. Maybe the president's military advisers didn't want to admit defeat.

Other such briefings and conversations followed, and the case against the war grew.

'Frightening Cost

Back in his Boston office that summer, O'Neill sat down with one of his young interns, law student Joseph McLaughlin, and drafted a statement to be sent to his constituents as a newsletter. Citing the war's "frightening cost" in lives and dollars, he said, "I cannot help but wonder whether this may not be too high a price to pay for an obscure and limited objective . . . in an inherently civil conflict." It was a difficult statement to write. O'Neill's political life had always been firmly rooted in party loyalty and unswerving support of Democratic presidents. On every Vietnam vote from that day forward, O'Neill voted with the doves.

O'Neill told President Johnson that he was not bowing to pressure from "crackpot students" who had demonstrated against the war in Harvard Square and burned American flags, nor to the academicians (whom he called "acadamians") in his district who had long been opposed to the war. In fact, he was convinced that the pro-war sentiment was so strong in his area that he could be defeated for re-election. "Oh, Jesus," he said, "I ran through a hard period of time. People would cross the street when they saw me coming." Polls showed only 15 per cent of the voters on his district agreed with him in opposing the war. (The 26th Amendment, extending the vote to 18-year-olds, hadn't yet been ratified.)

Right Place, Right Time

When he finished talking, O'Neill remembers that President Johnson put his arm around his shoulder and told him that he understood, that in spite of O'Neill's decision, they would always be friends. Johnson would not quarrel with him once it was clear that the congressman's position was based on a conscientious assessment of the issue rather than on political expediency. "I said, Nothing political to it," O'Neill recalls. "It hurts me. I never had the academicians with me. I still don't have them with me."

If, as O'Neill said, he expected his Vietnam position to be politically unpopular at home, it turned out to be one of his more fortunate moves in Washington. It extended his appeal far beyond the poker-playing and big-city machine politicians to a new crowd of intellectuals and doves. More building blocks of leadership were fitting into place. It may be a cliche, but true, that much success in politics comes from being in the right place at the right time. O'Neill's stand on the war put him in the right place at the right time.